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SUBJECT: CARDINAL ZEN OPTIMISTIC ON SINO-VATICAN RELATIONS;  
CONTINUES TO SPEAK OUT ON DEMOCRACY

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Classified By: E/P Chief Simon Schuchat. Reasons: 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On March 30, newly appointed Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun said he was optimistic about the restoration of ties between the Holy See and Beijing. According to Zen, the Pope had made clear that he wanted to visit the mainland. During a special Vatican ceremony for the new cardinals on March 27, Zen introduced former Chairman of the Democratic Party Martin Lee and Next Media founder Jimmy Lai to the Pope. The inclusion of Lee, a prominent symbol of Hong Kong's democracy movement, and Lai, a prominent proponent of press freedom, in Zen's delegation to the Vatican has stirred up debate over the role of Cardinal Zen in Hong Kong politics and as an advisor to the Pope on Sino-Vatican relations. A March 29 "Ming Pao" editorial expressed concern that Zen's actions may have harmed the city's democracy movement and the Sino-Vatican relationship by linking the two issues. One Catholic contact told us that the democrat and the publisher traveled to the Vatican out of personal friendship with Zen, rather than any political motivations. End Summary.

Zen Optimistic on Sino-Vatican Relations

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¶2. (SBU) On March 30, one day after returning from the Vatican, newly appointed Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun held a press conference and said he was optimistic about the restoration of ties between the Holy See and Beijing. According to Zen, the Pope had made clear that he wanted to visit the mainland and held out the possibility of a trip before official relations were established. However, Zen said that the Vatican had made clear to the central government that it would have to "guarantee real religious freedoms" before the Vatican would consider normalizing relations. The Vatican Foreign Minister Giovanni Lajolo told the "South China Morning Post" on March 25 that the "time is ripe" for the two sides to establish diplomatic relations. In response to these overtures, PRC Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang said on March 30, "We hope the Vatican side can take real actions to create a good atmosphere and favorable conditions for the bettering of ties." Qin also raised China's requirements that the Vatican break official ties with Taiwan and not interfere in China's internal affairs.

A Cardinal, a Democrat and a Publisher

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¶3. (C) As predicted, Pope Benedict asked Zen to remain in

Hong Kong and head the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese. While Cardinal Zen will certainly play a role in Sino-Vatican relations, there had been local speculation that Cardinal Zen might play a more diplomatic, low profile role in the democracy movement. However, this speculation quickly turned out to be wishful thinking on the part of pro-Beijing groups.

On March 27, Zen and the 14 other new cardinals had an opportunity to introduce their family and friends to the Pope at a special Vatican audience. The Hong Kong delegation included former Chairman of the Democratic Party Martin Lee and Next Media founder and "Apple Daily" Publisher Jimmy Lai.

(Note: The Cardinal is close to Lee and Lai, who are both devout Catholics. Moreover, our contacts have told us that Zen baptized Lai, who is a Catholic convert, and that Lee is Lai's godfather. End Note.) After the ceremony, Lee told the media that Zen introduced him to the Pope as a "legislator fighting for democracy in Hong Kong" to which the Pope said, "Do continue." Lee urged the Pope to pray for religious freedom in China. Lai reportedly told the Pope, "Please come to China and bring us love and democracy." In response to Lai's invitation, the Pope said, "I will come."

¶4. (C) The inclusion of Lee, a prominent symbol of Hong Kong's democracy movement, and Lai, a prominent proponent of press freedom, in Zen's delegation to the Vatican has stirred up debate over the role of Cardinal Zen in Hong Kong politics and as an advisor to the Pope on Sino-Vatican relations. A March 29 "Ming Pao" editorial expressed concern that Zen's actions may have harmed the city's democracy movement and the prospects for Sino-Vatican normalization by linking the two issues. The paper stated that while Zen's invitation to his two friends may have helped mobilize Catholics in the fight for universal suffrage in Hong Kong, but "the price for that may be Beijing's deepened misgivings." Citing Poland and the Philippines, the author states, "religious leaders' involvement contributed to changes of government. However, such a situation in Hong Kong would be extremely dangerous...We call on the Cardinal to put aside Hong Kong

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affairs soon so that he can assist the Pope in a detached capacity and help bring about formal ties between China and the Vatican. He should not wear two hats at the same time. He must try not to mix matters concerning human rights, justice and democracy in Hong Kong into Sino-Vatican diplomatic negotiations."

¶5. (SBU) Media coverage of the Zen's elevation was split along expected political lines. "Apple Daily's" coverage of Zen's elevation has been positive and glowing, while the pro-Beijing "Wen Wei Po" had no original reporting of Zen's trip to Rome. Instead, "Wen Wei Po" printed a summary of the "Ming Pao" editorial. Charles Ho, the Chairman of Sing Tao Newspaper Corporation, joked about Lai's invitation to the Pope to visit China during a March 29 award ceremony saying, "I recently heard that a certain newspaper owner invited the Pope to China...Who does this guy think he is, to invite someone home, without asking the owners of the house?" The "Oriental Daily" and "The Sun," however, did not report on Cardinal Zen's trip to Rome. (Note: Both newspapers are the only non-PRC supported papers with websites freely accessible in China. End Note.)

¶6. (C) Father Peter Barry, a researcher at the Holy Spirit Study Center (HSSC) told poloff on March 30 that analysts should not read motives into Lee and Lai's trip to Rome. Most likely, the democrat and the publisher traveled to Rome out of friendship with Zen. Besides, said Barry, Zen merely provided the Holy Father with context when introducing the two men, mentioning that both Lee and Lai were involved in Hong Kong's democracy movement. Chinese University of Hong Kong professor Joseph Cheng told us on March 30 that pro-Beijing groups initially did not know how to react to Zen's elevation. However, after Liu Bainian, Vice Chairman of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association called Zen's appointment as Cardinal a "hostile act" against China on

March 8, Hong Kong's traditional leftists began to openly criticize Zen. Cheng said it was significant that the "Ming Pao" had taken such a high profile approach in criticizing Zen.

Don't Sacrifice Taiwan, Urges Pro-Taiwan Trade Union

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17. (SBU) Separately, on March 31, the Hong Kong and Kowloon Trade Union Council, a pro-Taiwan trade union, presented a petition to the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese, urging the Vatican to maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan and not to sacrifice an ally. The Catholic Diocese scheduled a meeting for the trade union to meet with Cardinal Zen.

Cunningham